

EDUCATING FOR EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Creating an environmentally literate populace in the Commonwealth requires coordinated leadership, systemic requirements for public schools’ graduating seniors, and equitable, substantial investment in programs across Virginia. With the current challenges of climate change and environmental injustice, Virginia has an opportunity now to prioritize the tools needed to develop environmentally literate citizens who understand issues and the systems that influence the environment, and make responsible decisions regarding their impact.

CHALLENGE

Despite the efforts of many individuals and organizations across the Commonwealth, environmental literacy remains a challenge for much of the state, especially those from traditionally disadvantaged communities. The closure of the Virginia Office of Environmental Education in October 2016 removed coordinated leadership by which to promote environmental literacy and focus on equitable access for all Virginia students in quality environmental education. The state agencies are now faced with vacancies in key roles which, without immediate action, puts progress toward the goal of an environmentally literate Commonwealth in even further jeopardy.

Environmental literacy in Virginia is an equity issue. Many communities don’t have the resources to provide quality environmental education programs that emphasize field experiences and practical applications, which tie directly to Virginia’s emphasis on STEM education.¹ In some cases these are the same communities that lack adequate access to green spaces, which poses both physical and mental health challenges.² These are often the same communities that fall victim to environmental injustices because they lack the basic understanding of the systems at

work, both natural and civic. Furthermore, these rich learning experiences benefit academic achievement, student engagement and must be available to all.

As a Commonwealth, we are facing pressing environmental challenges and a rapidly changing climate. To respond to these challenges, Virginia needs an engaged citizenry equipped with the knowledge and motivation to conserve our natural resources and protect our public health. Virginia’s next generation of environmental stewards begins with meaningful and inclusive environmental education.

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SOLUTION

Environmental education leadership at the state-level would ensure better coordination between school districts, nongovernmental organizations, and state agencies, promoting a more holistic and comprehensive plan for improving environmental literacy throughout the Commonwealth. State leaders should partner with organizations that have experience with promoting and providing environmental education and are intentional about bringing these educational opportunities to low income communities and communities of color.

Additionally, increased state funding can help provide every Virginia K-12 student — regardless of race, ethnicity, region, sexual orientation, income, faith or disability — with a quality place-based, outdoor, experiential learning curriculum, such as a meaningful watershed education experience. Such an investment will ensure that all communities across the Commonwealth have

an active role in finding equitable and sustainable solutions to environmental challenges, especially those impacting the health and welfare of environmental justice communities. Furthermore, these rich learning experiences should be available to all.

By instituting an environmental literacy graduation requirement, the Commonwealth would ensure that all of its students graduate high school with the basic knowledge needed to understand issues related to the environment. Currently, there is an optional environmental literacy diploma seal students can choose to earn. This approach is not at the level of widespread adoption and can be difficult for students from under-resourced communities.

Mural Made by a 4th Grade Class
Image credit: Dorothy Tepper



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Fund \$1.5M in competitive grants through the general fund to be managed by Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), prioritizing underserved communities, to provide every student across the entire Commonwealth — regardless of race, color, national origin, income, faith, disability or region — a meaningful environmental education experience.

Direct the Department of Education to conduct a study on environmental literacy graduation requirements to assess the status of environmental literacy and develop a plan to ensure all graduating Virginia public school students are environmentally literate.

Fund an FTE to coordinate and oversee environmental literacy goals across the state.